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THE BIRD OF PASSAGE

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Until within comparatively recent years the temporary migrant or "bird of passage," as he is familiarly called, has played an insignificant part in the industrial history of this country. Temporary migration demands ease and cheapness of transportation together with a wide knowledge of industrial opportunity. Until the working classes of one country are acquainted with the opportunities for employment in other countries, and until rapid and cheap facilities for transportation have made these opportunities available for laborers at a distance, temporary migration will not arise.

To the European the most common form of this phenomenon is seasonal migration, *Sachsengänerei*, i.e., the movement of laborers, and in particular of farm laborers, to take advantage of the opportunities of employment during the summer months. The laborers generally leave the home country in the spring and return in the autumn, taking their earnings with them. There is a considerable movement of this nature of laborers from Italy to France, from Ireland to England, of the Flemish to Holland and France, and of the Poles to Germany.

A common form of this migration is to be found where the supply of laborers in the home country is insufficient to meet the demands made by some extraordinary construction. Such tasks usually require low-grade labor upon some more or less permanent transportation project. The digging of a canal or a subway, the building of a railroad through some sparsely settled country, demands the presence of a large body of unskilled laborers during the period of construction. If the project is of great magnitude, like the digging of the Panama Canal, these laborers will be drawn from a large number of different countries. Temporary provision will be made for their support and entertainment during the period of construction, and at its close most of the laborers will return to

their home country. The advantages offered by the completion of this project may be sufficient to change these temporary into permanent migrants, and persuade them to settle in the localities where this work was done. Thus thousands of Irish laborers who had temporarily settled in New England and New York were used in building the railroads of this country and when this work was completed a large number of them permanently settled upon the lands which were made more available when communication with the rest of the country was possible.

By the term "bird of passage," as used in this article, is meant the male laborer who comes to the United States with the intention of earning and saving money while employed here, and who, satisfied with his competence or finding the opportunity for employment gone through the beginning of a period of industrial depression, returns home with his savings. Few of these laborers take all of their savings with them upon their departure, but in most cases out of their savings have been from time to time sending money to friends or relatives in the home country for their support, to pay off the mortgage on the home farm, to purchase land, or to improve the property already possessed. Improvements made with American money upon small farms are frequently seen in villages of Austria-Hungary and Italy.

When the only information concerning the opportunities for employment in the United States offered to Europeans came through occasional books by travelers or letters from friends and relatives, it was not to be expected that the illiterate working population of eighteenth-century Europe would look for the chance for temporary employment across the ocean. Nor were such opportunities available in the United States. Capital for large undertakings was scarce and the digging of canals offered the first opportunity for the employment of low-grade labor upon a large scale. From about 1840 date the large constructive operations of this country. Even if the demand for the "bird of passage" had existed in this country previous to 1850 and this demand had been known throughout Europe, it is improbable that it could have been met, because a means of cheap and rapid ocean transportation had not been provided. Transportation was slow, expen-

sive, and, with the facilities at that time, inconvenient and dangerous. The possibility of typhus fever was not to be encountered lightly nor with the possibility of small financial advantage. The population of Europe was land hungry and it was the opportunity offered by the cheap, fertile land of this country which attracted settlers. Labor was scarce and wages high in the United States but this was due rather to the presence of unoccupied land than to the demands of industry. It has been only since the Civil War that the conditions of demand and supply have been favorable to the "bird of passage" and it is not surprising that we should be confronted with an international movement of considerable magnitude. Although most students of immigration seem to be united in their belief that this country should welcome able-bodied, normal persons of decent habits who desire to settle permanently in the United States, there is a general feeling that the "bird of passage" forms a conspicuous exception to this rule and that this migrant to the United States is not to be encouraged. The objections which have been raised against him can be grouped under four heads:

1. Since he does not intend to settle in this country he is not likely to be interested in American institutions, to adopt American customs, or to acquire American ideals. He furnishes an alien element in our body politic.

2. The money which he saves in this country is not deposited in American banks to be used to develop our industries, but is sent abroad. This constitutes a permanent drain upon our resources, amounting to millions of dollars annually.

3. The competition of this laborer, accustomed to foreign standards, tends to lower the American standard of living and makes it difficult for the American laborer to compete with him.

4. The presence of a supply of migratory laborers tends, by stimulating the overproduction of commodities, to lead to industrial crises. If the supply of labor in a country were fixed, the increase in the demand for laborers would lead to increased wages which would make entrepreneurs more careful about increasing production.

There undoubtedly is truth in each one of these objections, but

there are accompanying advantages which have been but little emphasized by students of this problem. There is little doubt that this large number of temporary migrants tends to reduce the variations in the price of labor by keeping the ratio of demand to supply more nearly constant. When the coming of industrial prosperity causes an increase in the demand for labor, this demand is met, in part, by the immigration of Europeans. When the demand falls off and a period of depression approaches, the supply is diminished by the return of these immigrants to their home country. The statistics of the arrival and departure of immigrants for the past few years show this conclusively. The arrival of tens of thousands of this class in good seasons undoubtedly tends to limit the rise in the rate of wages in this country and thus furnishes grounds for the criticism of labor leaders, but when hard times come these same laborers return home and reduce the supply at the very time when the demand is beginning to fall off. Those who return are not the ones who have saved the most money and made the greatest advance in this country, but those whose departure is hastened by the insecurity of their position here. During the depression of 1907 nearly three thousand Italians left New Haven, Conn., for the home country, and a careful investigation showed that those to depart were the ones who felt themselves in the poorest position to withstand a period of depression. They earned their money in a country of high prices, but when employment ceased they preferred to spend their earnings in a country of low prices. The result of such migration during the crisis is to limit the fall in wages and to free the community from the necessity of supporting a number of unemployed who have made scant provision for the future. The labor union leaders were never so successful in combating a fall in the rate of wages during a period of industrial depression as in 1907–8, and it may be seriously asked whether this was not due in part to the reduction in the supply of labor caused by the withdrawal over-sea of so many thousands of temporary migrants.

It is undoubtedly true that wages in this country during prosperous times are kept at a lower level than would be the case if immigration were prohibited. It may be that crises are hastened

since entrepreneurs are not warned by an increase in the rate of wages that stormy times are ahead. But it is also true that certain of the most unfortunate effects of hard times, a decrease in the rate of wages and a great increase in the number of dependents upon charity, are less apparent when the supply of laborers decreases at the time when the demand for them reaches a low point. It is also difficult to prove that industrial crises are most frequent or most severe in those countries which are receiving these temporary migrants in large numbers.

It may be unfortunate that many employments are seasonal and that many operations can be conducted only in warm weather. But we must make the best of things as they are. There will continue to be a demand for seasonal labor in agriculture and construction in this country. This demand can best be met by single men, who, unhampered by family ties, feel free to accept temporary employment. Most of these laborers spend the winters in the cities where there is a continual surplus of unskilled labor. It is difficult to see how the interests of this country can be injuriously affected if these surplus laborers choose to return to the home country, there to remain until there is demand for their services in the United States.

Our country certainly owes a debt to Europe in that every group of returning immigrants contains some whose vitality has been impaired by severe labor. Others have been the victims of industrial accident and return to the home country with maimed bodies. Compensation for such injuries is a farce in many cases and if they have succeeded in saving something from their wages, and wish to spend their remaining days in a country of low prices, we should not consider that we have been wronged by such action. They came to us in the prime of life, filled with hope and enthusiasm, they performed heroic service in our mines and factories, and now are "scrapped" to increase the number of non-efficients at home. Perhaps we find it cheaper to import our workers than to raise them. It may be cheaper to send home the worn-out and disabled industrial veterans than to support them here. In either case we owe something to the "bird of passage" and the country which reared him.

That financial system is generally considered the best which is most elastic. A system which will not meet the fluctuations of trade is unsatisfactory. In the matter of employment the "bird of passage" serves as a sort of floating dock to rise and fall with the tides of industrial ebb and flow and render more stable the rate of wages.

This stability, however, is purchased at considerable cost. A study of the arrivals and departures noted in the reports of the commissioner-general of immigration for the past few years will show that in the spring of the year a comparatively large proportion of the immigrants are males and that in the fall of the year a comparatively large proportion of the emigrants are males. The "bird of passage" is a male. He may be married or single, but as far as this country is concerned he is single. The industrial unit in this country has been the family. We have gone on the assumption that the head of the household should, with his earnings, be able to support a household. The "bird of passage" has no such obligation resting upon him. He wants to save a maximum amount of money. He is, therefore, anxious at all times to increase his earnings, but greater attention is given to the problem of reducing his expenditure. A group of these individuals will unite in hiring rooms and purchasing food with someone to do the cooking and care for the establishment. There is overcrowding and unsanitary living but the cost is reduced to a minimum. If the objection can be made that among certain classes in this country there is a standard of high living, it certainly cannot be raised against the "bird of passage." The trouble with him is that he does not have a high standard of living and herein seems to lie the principal danger from this group.

This apparently unlimited supply of cheap labor has made us careless in certain respects in this country. We have continued to perform by manual labor much work which would otherwise have been done by machinery. In this way invention may have been retarded. We have become careless and wasteful of human life. We neglect properly to safeguard our machinery and protect the lives of our miners.

A plentiful supply of labor is undoubtedly desirable, but if an

appreciable proportion comes from temporary migrants, the brunt of the competition will fall upon the American father, and we may expect a still longer postponement of marriage and a further reduction in the size of the family. If the American laborer persists in maintaining or raising his standard of living, and it is to be hoped he will, the only way by which he can meet this competition will be by increasing his efficiency or limiting the number who are dependent upon him. If he escapes the evil effects of this competition by rising above it, all will be well. But if he is forced to approximate the standards of the celibate immigrant we shall have (among the native stock) a retardation in the natural increase which is none the less evident although we may be unconscious of its cause.